

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## The happily ever aftermath

My mother and sister were diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma when I was eight years old. Years went by filled with two- to three-hour road trips, one way, to the city from our remote home for their relentless rounds of chemotherapy and radiation and eventually bone marrow transplants. It meant I was home alone with my little brother who is on the spectrum and couldn't walk or talk. It meant my father couldn't work for over eight years.

There were four physicians in our small town that served 2,500 people over a 50-km radius, and there were insufficient resources to treat cancer or any other complex medical need. Often, the hospital or two-bed emergency department was closed because of a lack of physician coverage. So many people needing help and so few people to do the helping. It was then I decided I could help, and I would pursue medicine.

My family was poor; we had no means for me to attend university without loans or working during the school year and summers. I could not travel, and research was time-consuming with the internet, electronic articles, abstracts and stacks just appearing on the scene. My grades were above average, but I couldn't afford to take time for an MCAT course or even afford to write the exam. I finished my undergraduate degree in biochemistry and started a government-funded Master's-PhD flip program through Agriculture and Agrifood Canada. I completed three years of study at two universities and five publications when it became apparent that the path would not result in studying medicine as I hoped, nor did it provide a sufficient wage to support myself and my family and still afford the necessary fees to be considered for medical school.



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- Dr. Pauwlina Cyca

Dr. Pauwlina Cyca, Calgary

There was a shortage of pharmacists in the mid-2000s. Large chain pharmacies were funding full degrees for anyone with the academic grit to apply and succeed. I started pharmacy school in 2006 at Dalhousie, worked in the ICU, drug information and surgical services prior to landing in community pharmacy after graduation. I purchased my first pharmacy in 2010 and within three years transitioned to a corporate role as a pharmacy operations specialist for Shoppers Drug Mart, at the same time holding office as the president-elect of our regulatory college.

I had also just given birth to my premature twin girls. They were 28 weeks and less than 2 lbs with congenital heart defects. We stayed in the NICU for 103 days and then the IWK PICU for three more weeks. At that time, I felt unsupported, invisible and nowhere close to feeling like a mother. I co-founded the Canadian Premature Babies Foundation, realized charitable status and lobbied the Canadian government to include premature infants as critically ill children within *Bill C51*. We were successful, and in doing so, families with premature infants in the NICU were eligible for the critically ill child benefit rather than taking maternity leave immediately and having fewer weeks with their babies at home. Policy and advocacy were well within my wheelhouse, and I felt incredible fulfillment helping in this way.

Shortly after, we moved our family from Moncton, NB, to Calgary, AB, for my partner's career. Our marriage dissolved less than a year later while I was on maternity leave with our third child. Needing employment – and quickly – I opened another pharmacy. It wasn't long before I was offered my previous role in operations, but this time in BC. I moved with the children to Vancouver Island, built my dream home and remarried. Days later, the children and I were summoned back to Calgary and the career was lost once more. I leveraged my national network within the pharmacy industry to secure another role, this time resourcing hospital pharmacies across Alberta.

Sadly, my mother passed away only two days after I started that role, and I wasn't given the opportunity to be with her, grieve her loss or even plan with my family to celebrate her life. Fast forward eight months, I travelled back to NS to put her to rest with my family. She left me and my siblings each a letter. In mine, she wrote: "Pauwlina, you must follow your dream. You must at least try. You will regret the most not trying."

I proceeded to write my resignation letter, apply and pay to write the MCAT and enrol in an asynchronous MCAT learning course. I studied for five weeks, wrote the exam and performed reasonably well. I started training full time for a full-distance Ironman set to take place one year exactly after my mother passed away. I applied to U of C medical school. I started a new company that resources independently owned pharmacies and their teams (which I continue to do), and I was then accepted into medical school with a scholarship.

I realized my dream again after my mother had written a letter before she passed away. My family and personal experiences as a patient, a parent, a family member, an allied health professional, a policy maker, a regulator and a person all provided a well-rounded framework of resilience and perspective that enabled the soft skills of practicing medicine to solidify well before the academic components. I feel lucky in that regard.

I hope to provide comprehensive general medicine to both urban and rural communities of Alberta, to be the advocate and soft spot to land for people who need hope and an influential voice. I want to provide cancer care and end-of-life care. I want to form relationships with whole families and follow them as they grow. I want to be competent in

procedures so that I am the familiar face patients can come to when they need something. In essence, I want to be the community doctor, the one that catches the swollen lymph node in a seven-year-old and does a thorough work-up to provide the most effective chance of successful treatment. I want to provide mental health support to parents with sick children or whose marriages are strained or to the abused mothers and women who have nowhere to turn.

My experiences have been numerous and complex, but I feel lucky to have had them. I am living my happily ever after in the aftermath of circumstances beyond my control, and I hope I can inspire others to realize theirs too.

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For more information about the Professional Association of Resident Physicians of Alberta, [please visit their website](#).